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ABSTRACT

New Hispanic immigrants to the United States bring with them a different world view and a desire to succeed in a new country. They also find resistance to their presence, prejudice against their language, and ignorance of their customs on the part of many older, more settled Americans. In addition, children quickly learn that their old customs are not valued by the larger population, and often adopt this disdain for their family traditions. But these children are paying too high a price for their assimilation, as they are losing their own characteristics, traditions, and values. Most Americans are woefully ignorant of all aspects of Latin American life. Through Latin American stories such as "The Legend of Food Mountain," "Atariba and Niguayona," "Mother Scorpion Country," "The Invisible Hunters," and "How We Came to the Fifth World" among others, Americans can learn to appreciate the many facets of culture that Hispanics bring to this country. In addition to offering these stories, teachers can use activities such as comparing creation stories, inviting immigrants, and celebrating Hispanic holidays to help children to understand the stories and the cultures of Hispanic Americans. (A list of 16 classroom activities is attached.) (PRA)

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GOLD FROM THE SOUTH: HISPANIC LITERATURE

by

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GOLD FROM THE SOUTH: HISPANIC LITERATURE

America is slowing turning brown. Asians, Africans, and Islanders are arriving every day, but the largest number of new immigrants are Hispanic. They come from Cuba and Puerto Rico, from Mexico and Nicaragua, from Chile and Argentina, from all the other countries south of the border. They bring with them what all immigrants bring: a different world view and a desire to succeed in a new country. They, like each new wave of immigrants, also find resistance to their presence, prejudice against their language, and ignorance of their customs, on the part of many older more-settled Americans.

But each group of immigrants has enriched our country, not weakened it. Hispanics, for example, bring with them strong feelings of the importance of the family, an attitude that no matter what happens or what it costs, family is to be valued. They are also willing to work, willing to do the kinds of jobs that perhaps others do not want to do. And their earnings are not just to enrich themselves. They see their money as a support for their families, often sending a large percentage of it back to relatives still at home.

What has been true of other waves of immigrants is also true of Hispanics.

The first generation of immigrants may keep strong ties with the old country, speak their native language, and live by their traditional customs. Within a few generations, however,

that may well change. Children of immigrants tend to want to throw off their old-country habits. They want to dress like other Americans, listen to the same music, and eat the same foods.

Younger children usually find learning English much easier than their parents do and they soon outstrip their parents in communicating with the population at large. Sometimes this causes a disruption in the family. Children may feel ashamed of the poor English of their parents in social situations.

Children quickly learn that their old customs are not valued by the larger population and they may adopt the same disdain for their own family traditions.

Such immigrants, particularly the children, are paying too high a price for assimilation. They are losing their own characteristics, traditions, and values, many of which they have never really learned to appreciate.

All groups of immigrants have gone through this. Hispanics, however, often seem to be slower at acclimating to American culture than some other groups. This may be because they are perhaps less eager to lose their traditions and values, less accepted into the mainstream, and also because they have greater opportunity to return to their old country to see relatives. Some Mexican-Americans, for example, return each year to visit their families in Mexico. The bond is never quite broken, nor do they want to break it.

The situation may be problematic. On the one hand, without assimilation into American culture, the American dream

will always elude immigrants. They will not get the good jobs or the equal opportunities that are so grandly promised by our country. On the other hand, what a high price immigrants are often asked to pay.

American public schools have had the mission, sometimes clearly spelled out and other times not, of helping immigrants assimilate. Through the late 19th century and the early 20th century, the public schools taught millions of immigrants not only English, drilled with their blue-black spellers and McGuffey readers, but also how to be Americans, symbolized by that picture of George Washington which was seen in almost every American classroom. The curriculum and program in the public schools in those days was about as inflexible as the rows of student desks bolted to the floor.

But times have changed. We have learn to mourn the loss of values that could have enriched America as much as we have rejoiced in new, totally dedicated citizens. Today, the transition is perhaps more sensitive, more aware that the old ways were not all bad, and that there is much that could enrich Americna life.

Looking then at Hispanic children, we find it is quite unfair to expect Hispanic children to break completely from their own culture and customs to be accepted into modern American life. What they cherish is worth cherishing. We can learn from them as much as they learn from us.

It is have often been noted by Hispanics how cold a country the United States seems compared to the warmth of their old countries, how stiff and formal, even conditional,

relations are among people compared to their own totally accepting relationships, how the use of English sometimes seems to separate people rather than unite them.

We are all Americans, both North and South (and Mexicans are even North Americans), yet there are huge differences in attitude. The United States, as a whole, has relegated the native culture, that of American Indians, to the reservations. Only today are we rediscovering the depth of that culture. When we read their stories we are impressed with what we could have learned if we had been willing to listen a hundred years ago.

But it is not too late to listen to what we can learn from our Hispanic immigrants.

Most Americans are woefully ignorant of all aspects of Latin American life. It is through literature that we can learn to appreciate the many facets of culture that Hispanics bring to us.

As we study such literature, certain aspects stand out clearly. Perhaps most significantly, the Indian culture of Latin America, in its many different forms, has not been lost, although it has undergone a change. Although, as we know, in many cases, native tribes were brutally massacred and customs and religion were treated as demonic, still the early Latin American explorers often married native women. As a consequence, a very large number of Latin Americans today are neither Indian nor Spanish nor any other European; they are of mixed blood. It is true that there exist pockets of pure-blooded Indians as well as Europeans, but these are

outnumbered by the mixed-blooded people.

Because of inter-marriage, customs, values, and ideas which are often passed on from mother to children, have been preserved. Such facets of culture show up in books such as the few I shall use today.

The first is these is adapted from the legends of the ancient Aztecs and called The Legend of Food Mountain. It tells how when human beings were created, food had to be provided for them. Corn was found to be the appropriate food and it had to be gained at great cost, involving the help of the lightning and the rain. The Earth needed to be nurtured and it would respond with nurturing. The life of the ancient Indians in Mexico can truly be said to revolved around the growing of the corn. This tale clearly puts their food growing in the realm of the sacred. And that is exactly how it was when Cortez and the Spaniards arrived.

Another Latin American story, called Atariba & Niguayona, was adapted from a Puerto Rican tale by Harriet Rohner & Jesus Guerrero Rea. In this story Atariba is ill and Niguayona, who loves her, finds he must search for the caimoni tree to find the fruit that will save her life. As he goes he is helped by his god, Yucaju, who lights his way and by the plants and animals who befriend and help him. Here, as in the previous tale, we find man's kinship with nature. Nature is there to help man and man treats nature with the utmost respect, reverence, and gratitude. Even today, Puerto Rico, hovering as it does between the effects of its Spanish conquest and its American overlord, still sees persons such as

Niguayona as heroes.

Mother Scorpion Country from the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua is another story of love. In this story, we see a very loving married couple, Naklili and his wife Kati, who do not want to be parted, even in death. When Kati dies, Naklili insists on being buried with her, and follows her to the land of the dead, Mother Scorpion Country. But he cannot live there. Kati finds beauty and happiness there whereas Naklili sees only death and destruction. He returns to the land of the living only now to find rejection and sorrow. In the end he dies, of his own choice, and returns to Mother Scorpion Country to live happily with Kati.

What a profound image of death! To the living, death means only sorrow and pain, but to the dead, it is a new life of beauty and joy. However, one cannot appreciate it alive, and after seeing it, no one would want to return to the land of the living. This tale of an afterlife has strong echoes in many of the religions of the world. The next life will only be better than this one, but we cannot see that now.

Whereas Atariba and Niguayona and Mother Scorpion's Country are stories predating the Spanish conquest, The Invisible Hunters relates directly to the conquest, to what happens when a tribal culture meets a modern European culture (modern in the sense that Spain was at the time of the Conquest). The Invisible Hunters comes from the Miskito Indians of Nicaragua and is concerned with three hunters who went out each day to hunt the wari, a wild pig beloved by their tribe. They encountered a magic vine which would make them

inv sible. This power would be given to them on two conditions: they would not sell the meat but give it away and they would not hunt with guns, only sticks.

At first the hunters had no problems with these regulations: these were what they had always done. The wari they hunted was for all the tribe; one does not sell to his family. And they had no guns.

But the coming of the traders changed all that. The traders wanted to buy meat and soon the hunters learned that they could hunt much more, sell more, and make more money, if they used guns. And so they did. The life of the tribal people was forever changed, and the three hunters who had violated their privileges and turned invisible to hunt were unable to return to real life. They stayed invisible and are often still heard in the jungles of Nicaragua. The loss of the tribal life was therefore a true tragedy.

This story fits in with a long tradition of the loss of culture and the good life when the people forget the old customs and the old gods.

A similar story comes from Mexico, entitled <u>How we Came to the Fifth World.</u> In this story, from the ancient Aztecs, the people have lived through four previous worlds. In each case, they were ruled by one of the gods and eventually destroyed by that one, and always because they forgot the ways of the gods and allowed themselves to fight with one another over the goods of the world.

This is a significant story because Mexico is a land of earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters which tribal

people tend to see as the natural result of turning away from their gods.

According to historical reports, the Aztecs of Mexico were expecting some kind of natural disaster, as well as the return of a god, at the time of the arrival of Cortez. And what a disaster it proved to be. Their entire world changed forever.

In Brother Anansi and the Cattle Ranch we find the transformation completed. Brother Anansi, the spider, known among the Ashanti people of West Africa, as well as in the Caribbean, in Central America, and in North America, wherever African-Americans are found, is seen in this tale from Nicaragua, gets involved in cattle ranching. After all, his friend, the tiger, won the lottery! How much more modern could you get?

Anansi tells Tiger to buy the cattle; he knows a good pasture.

Tiger is delighted. Wonderful, he thinks, they could raise cattle and sell the meat, milk and cheese all over South America and to the United States.

Things go well at first, but then, Anansi tricks Tiger out of his cattle and ends up rich, while Tiger is broke. But, of course, Anansi always wins through trickery.

It is the only way the little ones of this world can win over the powerful ones.

Not only is Anansi mischievous, but so also are spirits in some of the Latin American stories. As nature is portrayed as animate, the gods are real, afterlife is taken for granted,

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so is the supernatural present. In the rollicking tale from Puerto Rico called My Aunt Otilla's Spirits a young boy in Puerto Rico makes the acquaintance of his aunt's spirits who knock every night. He also sees how her bones can leave her body, and on one memorable night, they do not get put back together right.

But these spirits are not frightening. Rather they are sort of mischievous and simply another facet of life.

Finally, we have the story called The Adventures of Connie and Diego by Maria Garcia whose own background is Kiowa, Yaqui, Spanish, and French. With such a varied background, she has had to learn, and hopes that others will learn, that color of skin does not matter. Connie and Diego (note the names: English and Spanish) are born with skins of many different colors. They are laughed at by the other children and they flee from their land and try to live with the animals. But they are not animals and the animals don't want them. Finally a rather short-tempered tiger tells them to look at themselves: You're human! The colors don't matter.

When they return to their home, the Land of Plenty, nothing has changed among the other people. But Connie and Diego have changed; they know they belong.

We all must work to help people develop tolerance, but the immigrants themselves, the people of many colors, must never be ashamed of what they are and of their heritage. Self-acceptance will precede and accompany acceptance by others.

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Activities

1. Compare Creation stories as seen in these books, other books of other cultures, and the Bible. How do human beings fit into creation? Make drawings showing variousa aspects of creation.

2. Talk about food that various cultures eat. Compare the growing of wheat with rice and with corn. Talk about ancient rituals to ensure a harvest and celebrations at the end of the harvest. Recall that Thanksgiving is a harvest feast.

3. Have children research their own ancestry. Where did their ancesters come from? What are some characteristics of their grandparents?

4. Have children write their autobiographies, including their heritage. What kinds of activities and celebrations do they have in their homes? What holidays do they celebrate and how do they celebrate them?

5. Compare ideas of life after death in seen in various stories.

6. Invite persons who are recent immigrants into the classroom to talk about what why they came to this country, what they miss about their homelands, and what they like about the United

States.

7. Use Spanish or words from other appropriate immigrant groups around the chalkboard to identify objects.

8. Dramatize the coming of Columbus and the Spaniards to Latin America. Do the same with the coming of the explorers to North America.

9. Discuss the plight of the Indians in both North and South America. Compare the idea of Reservations ij the U.S. with native villages in other countries.

10. Make a list of myths about the Indians (culled perhaps from Hollywood movies, comic books, and the Lone Ranger).

11. Make a list of characteristics of life in the United States, as seen by persons who have been here a long time, by recent immigrants, by American Indians, by Blacks.

12. Celebrate Hispanic holidays as well as American ones, depending on the Hispanics who are in the school.

13. Write poems about various countries, using color images. E.g., America is icy blue; Mexico is red. Explain.

14. Make a list of Nobel Prize winners and what they contributed to the world.

15. Have an ethnic feast at which children may sample food of many different countries.

16. Talk about spirits and the spirit world. Compare concepts of spirits from many countries, noting how in many countries spirits are mischievous rather than evil.

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